

# Fred Forbat and the History of Functionalism

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**F**red Forbat was a cosmopolitan, intellectual Jew with a middle-class background, whose work as an architect covers a wide spectrum – from furniture to regional plans – although his speciality became housing and city planning. He was a pioneer of the functionalistic style and had the remarkable ability to turn up in the shifting centres of this style's development. First as one of the few non-students who worked with Walter Gropius at Bauhaus in the early 20s, where he seems to have played a key role in defining the rationalistic “Bauhaus-style”. In Berlin he established his own office and made vital contributions to the social housing programmes of the late 20s. He then became an important member of the Ernst May Brigade, planning industrial towns for the Soviet Union in the early 30s. In Hungary he was among the first architects to introduce functionalism and when he later sought refuge in Sweden during the Second World War he earned the title “the father of modern comprehensive planning” in that country. This dramatic, international career,

and his participation in the CIAM organization, brought Forbat in close connection with leading modernists in many countries. His biography may therefore shed new light on several areas of research concerning the history of functionalism, some of which I will outline in this paper.

## Germany

The earliest works by Forbat are particularly interesting because they were part of the transition from an expressionistic to a more functionalistic style gradually developing in Gropius' private office in the years 1922–23. Forbat was only in his early twenties when he completed his education in Munich. He then went to Weimar in order to work for Walter Gropius. Acquainted with the rational industrial buildings made by Gropius and Meyer before the First World War Forbat was surprised to see their current, expressionistic works like Haus Sommerfeld in Berlin, the erection of which he was chosen to lead. The house is destroyed today but the garage with an apartment for the chauffeur, which was actually Forbat's first design task, still remains.



His first independent work was begun in 1921. It was a house for Mr. Stadthagen at the Sommerfeld Group and originally planned close to Haus Sommerfeld. It showed that Forbat preferred a more geometric, rational type of design, similar to the one used by his soon-to-be friend J.J.P. Oud. The house, especially in the alternative version he drew in 1922, resembled several building blocks put together. Forbat has stated in his memoirs that he was inspired by the mathematical sculptures of Georges Vantongerloo, who was a member of the De Stijl-group and a source of inspiration for Oud as well. Haus Stadthagen clearly points towards the variable houses Forbat later designed for the Bauhaussiedlung in Weimar.

The work probably impressed Gropius since he chose to work with the young architect on two historically important projects. The first was a storage building for Kappe & Co in Alfeld. Forbat claims he made the initial sketch design in 1922 and that this was only very slightly altered. Two perspectives in Forbat's archive, which differ very little from the building, support this. The building process was delayed during the hyperinflation but finally erected in 1924. The rational concrete framework and the large glass windows, which cover most of the facades, makes it comparable to Gropius' later masterpiece, Bauhaus Dessau. The Kappe building would remain almost forgotten for a long time but in 1985 Hartmunt Probst and Christian Schädlich pinpointed this as the project that marked a complete transition to a rational design process in the work of Gropius.<sup>1</sup>

The next "collaboration" was the housing for the



Storage building for Kappe & Co, Alfeld by Fred Forbat and Walter Gropius, drawn in 1922 and built in 1924.

planned Bauhaussiedlung in Weimar in 1922. The confusion surrounding this project has been great, because in the early Bauhaus publications it was attributed to the completely fictitious "department of architecture at the Bauhaus Weimar" while Forbat, who was chief architect, seldom has been given much credit. He was initially given instructions by Gropius to make standardized, variable houses and the result was the so-called Wabenbau-system, which was based upon the idea of using standardized concrete room-units. Gropius never signed those drawings and whether he actually participated as an architect or merely as the client has been impossible to clarify, yet Forbat listed this work as his own.<sup>2</sup> However, the research of Winfried Nerdinger has shown that Gropius was indeed dependent on his talented co-workers throughout his career for the simple reason that his ability to draw was very poor.<sup>3</sup> The Wabenbau-project showed Gropius' renewed interest in industrial building methods, and it clearly inspired the Haus am Horn showed at the 1923 Bauhaus exhibition.

Thus it is clear that Forbat worked, probably quite independently, on two of the first projects that shifted the "Bauhaus" architecture from the expressionist tendency towards the functionalistic style. Perhaps even more telling, however, is the fact that he had foreshadowed this shift in his own earlier Haus Stadthagen, which was actually built in the late 20s, in Zehlendorf. I am not saying that the young and inexperienced Forbat invented the functionalistic Bauhaus-style, but it is likely that he was a catalyst who brought together many of the modern ideas surrounding Bauhaus at the time.

Forbat worked on several other projects in Weimar during 1921–24, but the above-mentioned are the most important ones in terms of their significance to the history of "Bauhaus architecture". Forbat's contribution has been greatly overlooked by most researchers. There are many reasons for this, although the most obvious must be the tendency to focus upon the star architects of each generation, like Walter



Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, etc. This emphasis seems to me to be based, at least partly, upon the outdated view of the architect as the great solitary and artistic genius, which may be true in a few cases, but false in most, certainly in this one. One may question whether Gropius really belongs in that company or whether his greatest talent was the ability to find and nurture talented partners. Lately, Annemarie Jaeggi has attempted to lift Adolf Meyer out of "the shadow of Gropius".<sup>4</sup>

Although Forbat's projects in Weimar points towards functionalism, and occasionally reaches it – as in the sketch design for the Kappe storage building – much of his work still shows a preoccupation with traditional aesthetic values, especially proportions. In his proposals for an atelier-house and his own proposal for House Am Horn (1923) one can trace the use of proportional systems developed by J.L.M. Lauweriks. The knowledge of such things was certainly handed down to him by Adolf Meyer, a former pupil of Lauweriks.

Modern architecture in the 1920s grew out of the avant-garde positions held by many of the different groups in the art world at the time: cubism, De Stijl, constructivism, dadaism, etc. These groups were very different but shared two characteristics: First, they intended to break with the traditional view of art; and secondly, they were searching for a new aesthetics in which to express a new world order. It remains a great paradox that functionalism, which later seemingly rejected all aesthetic speculations, had its roots firmly planted in an aesthetic revolution.





After leaving Weimar Forbat became chief architect for the Sommerfeld Group in Berlin. This was a period (1925–28) when he was responsible for a great variety of projects, from furniture to industrial buildings. He also worked on the first plan for the Großsiedlung Zehlendorf, which included many ideas later realized by Bruno Taut. After setting up his own office Forbat made his most famous contribution to modern architecture, the three blocks in the Großsiedlung Siemensstadt. Siemensstadt was the result of collaboration between six different architects and demonstrated the growing complexity of the functionalistic approach. As Manfredo Tafuri put it:

It is incredible that contemporary historical study has not yet recognized this famous settlement, planned by Scharoun, as the work in which one of the most serious ruptures within the 'modern movement' became

evident. [...] Gropius and Bartning remained faithful to the concept of the housing as an assembly line, but contrasting with this were Scharoun's allusive irony and Häring's emphatic organic expression. If the ideology of the Siedlung consummated, to use Benjamin's phrase, the destruction of the 'aura' traditionally connected with the 'piece' of architecture, Scharoun's and Häring's objects tended instead to recover an 'aura' even if it was one conditioned by the new production methods and new formal structures<sup>5</sup>.

Like Tafuri most historians have concentrated on the extremes presented in the Siedlung.

The three blocks by Forbat can be seen to represent a compromise between the organic functionalism of Häring and the strict "constructivism"<sup>6</sup> of Gropius. The forms of Forbat's houses respond to the needs and conditions not only of the apartments on the inside, but also of the central park and the street on the outside. In another work from this time, the Mommensstadion in Berlin (1929), he also demonstrated an interest in the relationship between the building and the surrounding terrain or nature, an element almost completely absent in his Weimar projects. Forbat's architecture had clearly developed into a more realistic, subtle functionalism when faced with the demands of reality.

### The Soviet Union

The large emigration of German architects into the Soviet Union in the early 30s is an episode that has attracted surprisingly little critical attention among architectural historians. Forbat was a member of the Ernst May Brigade invited by the Soviet government in order to plan new industrial towns, among them the crown jewel of the first five-year plan: "the socialist city" of Magnitogorsk. Forbat's first and most important work in Russia, however, was to plan the city of Karaganda, a town for 200,000 inhabitants in Kazakhstan. Considering that he was given only two weeks to complete it, his plans are amazingly detailed, including drawings and perspectives for collective houses. These were very different from the typical Russian ideas for such dwellings, like the Narkomfin in Moscow by Ginzburg. Forbat's small houses with saddle roofs and traditio-

nally placed windows were clearly better suited to the harsh climate and seem in hindsight amazingly close to the regional functionalism developed in Scandinavia in the 1940s. The proposal for Karaganda was based on the lamellar plan but not used in the schematic manner that had characterized the first plan for Magnitogorsk by May and Mart Stam. On the other hand Forbat never had the time to visit the site and the proposal was therefore still rather theoretical. It was very well received by the Russians and clearly influenced the later works of the May brigade.

The second proposal for Magnitogorsk by May and Forbat encountered great difficulties. The chaotic situation at the site – already populated by 200,000 inhabitants living in tents or wooden barracks, some of them prisoners or forced labourers – combined with the bureaucratic idiocy of Soviet planning, made all their efforts practically useless. Lack of materials and technical knowledge were a great problem and the concern for the workers minimal. The fact that building had begun before any plans were finished severely limited the options available to the city-planners. “The socialist city” was begun but only one “superblock” was ever completed. Instead, the site of the city was later moved and mostly built after the Second World War according to the ideals of social realism.<sup>7</sup>

How should this episode be judged historically? In the west these plans were presented as theoretically advanced work, yet never studied in depth. In the Soviet Union on the other hand, Ernst May has been seen as a failure, a representative of a degenerate capitalist system that could not understand the needs of the Soviet people. Both views are clearly exaggerated and motivated by different political and cultural paradigms.

It is clear that the German experts failed when it came to practical reality, but it was hardly their fault. The plans they made were actually quite pragmatic and realistic, especially when compared to those presented by the Russian urbanists and desurbanists. However, the necessary conditions for a modernist city planning on this scale were simply not present in Russia at the time. The Germans who came to the Soviet Union most certainly believed in a socialist Utopia and had



high hopes of a city planning freed from the shackles of private land ownership. Forbat was seriously disappointed when faced with political ruthlessness, almost unbearable living conditions and bureaucratic incompetence. The revolutionary spirit was also gradually replaced by the Stalinist terror. Forbat left the Soviet Union after only one year and returned to Hungary.

Yet the experience and the methods developed in Russia formed the basis for Forbat's manifest *die funktionelle stadt* presented in connection with the fourth CIAM-congress in Athens, which he unfortunately never attended. In this text he argued for the decentrali-



zation of the urban fabric and suggested anonymous, small-scale housing in order not to destroy the natural landscape. It was largely overlooked both by the participants and later historians. Forbat's successful career as a city planner in Sweden would also have been quite impossible without his hard-learned experience in Russia.

### Hungary

Fred Forbat spent the next five years in Hungary. He saw it as an involuntary "exile in his native country" and he tried unsuccessfully to find work in countries like Greece, England, United States, Palestine and South Africa. Hungary in the mid-30s was a reactionary, nationalistic state – both culturally and politically. Almost all the work he managed to find in his hometown Pécs came from Jewish clients. It was almost exclusively small blocks of flats, villas, or summerhouses. These are Forbat's most unknown works but many of them still exist in decent condition.

In almost all of these houses Forbat added vernacular elements, especially rough local stone in the foundation and walls. In the first major work – the house for general Bálványi (1934) – he also used a protruding roof carefully designed to shade the interior from the summer heat, while allowing for the winter sun to warm the house. This building caused a controversy within the Hungarian CIAM when the group refused to publish the house in their annual special issue of the

magazine *Tér és Forma*, on the grounds that it was "formalistic" and "Schmitthennersk", referring of course to the famous nazi-sympathizer and traditionalist architect Paul Schmitthenner. This upset Forbat who tried to explain the functional advantage of the design, to no avail. An interesting letter of support from J.J.P. Oud was later published in *Tér és Forma*, where the author defended not only Forbat's building but formalism itself in the sense that the question of form had been neglected in modern architecture.

In Hungary Forbat was regarded as an undogmatic outsider in the modernist camp. His work was now based on the local artisanship rather than industrial methods. While most of his houses achieved a balance between vernacular and traditional elements (like saddle or hip roofs) and the functionalistic approach, he did, however, occasionally venture into even more traditional territory; for example in his proposals for a synagouge for the small town of Harkány (1937) or a Jewish cultural centre (1935). The latter was obviously influenced by the Italian *Stile Littorio*, an attempt to combine modernism and monumentality. He also presented traditional-looking standardized houses for a garden city in Pécs (1938) which could be compared to the work of Heinrich Tessenow. However, in that year the situation for Jews in Hungary became impossible and Forbat resumed his attempts to find work elsewhere. An invitation to come to Sweden from Uno Åhrén finally made it possible.

It would be easy to write off the traditional projects in Hungary as pragmatic attempts to be accepted in a culturally hostile environment, but there is much evidence to the contrary in Forbat's writings at the time. Even in his more functionalistic work he was clearly trying to recapture some of the traditional qualities lost in the avantgarde revolution of the 1920s. In this he was not alone. By the late 30s this tendency was evident all over Europe, and in the 40s it blossomed in Scandinavia. Nevertheless, after the Second World War traditional elements were again banned from modernist architecture because of their political connotations.

Modern architecture has far too often been treated as if it were a dominant and almost isolated trend in the history books while it was actually only a small

part of a larger cultural context, at least before the Second World War. Traditional architecture from the 20s and 30s has not been studied nearly as much, and especially the blurred line between traditionalism and modernism has been suppressed, probably in order to further the image of a pure modernist evolution.

In architectural history there seems to have been a great emphasis on theory rather than practice. One must consider what was actually built, not only the utopian ideas and theories of a few architects. The Charte d'Athènes might for instance have played far too great a role in our understanding of the functionalistic doctrine of city planning. The more realistic and built ideas by Taut, Wagner, May and Forbat show completely different solutions to many of the same issues. None of those architects – nor any representatives of the May Brigade – were present on the boat that sailed to Athens. If the congress had been held in Moscow as originally planned the outcome might have been very different indeed.

Fred Forbat truly believed in the modernist ideals and remained faithful to the concept of a rational architecture and city planning throughout his life. His architecture did, however, not always adhere to the strict functionalistic aesthetic or the early avantgarde positions on which much of our view of functionalism is still based. Instead his architecture was adapted to the reality of the situation, to the different contexts in which he found himself. "Architecture is not subject to man's wishes, it cannot be created by decree"<sup>8</sup>, was one of the conclusions that he drew in the Soviet Union in 1932.

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5. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia, Design and Capitalist Development*, Massachusetts 1976, tenth printing 1996, p. 117.
6. To use a term commonly used by Forbat and other architects at the time. It should not be confused with the specific Russian term. It stands instead for the type of functionalism that is based on geometry and construction and allows for a greater flexibility than Häring.
7. The best research into this fascinating story is not by any architectural historian. Look instead for Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain – Stalinism as a Civilization*, Berkeley, L.A., London: 1997. First published in 1995.
8. Fred Forbat, "Deutsche und Russische Architektur – Eine Umfrage bei deutschen Architekten", *Moskauer Rundschau*, nr 40, 1932. My own translation. Original text: "Architektur ist nicht dem Willen unterworfen, sie kann nicht dekretiert werden."

(Photos by Roger Jönsson.)

## Notes

1. Hartmut Probst och Christian Schädlich, *Walter Gropius*, Band 1, Berlin, 1985, p. 283
2. Fred Forbat – *Arkitektur och stadsplanering i Tyskland, USSR, Ungern och Sverige 1919–1969*, Stockholm: Sveriges Arkitekturmuseum, 1970. (The catalogue from the final exhibition of Forbat's work while he was still alive.)
3. Winfried Nerdinger, *Walter Gropius*, Berlin: Mann, 1985, pp. 29–31.
4. Annemarie Jaeggi, Adolf Meyer, *Der Zweite Mann, Ein Architekt im Schatten von Walter Gropius*, Berlin: 1994.